An Ethnographic Investigation of the Challenges of Literacy Acquisition in Selected Ugandan Rural Primary Schools

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Abstract
Between 2017 and 2018, Ugandan political leaders alleged that primary school teachers were the main cause of failure of learners' literacy acquisition and poor performance in the Primary Leaving Examinations (PLE), particularly in rural schools. The leaders blamed the teachers for incompetence. To this end, some leaders suggested that teachers must sit for Primary Leaving Examinations, particularly English and Mathematics to determine whether they were fit for the task. Based on an ethnographic study conducted in four rural schools in Uganda, this article shows that there are other factors that affect rural learners' performance in both national and regular evaluations other than perceived incompetence of the teachers. We also demonstrate the nature of sacrifices teachers and learners make to address the real practical challenges associated with literacy attainment. Analysing data collected through classroom observations and teacher interviews in Kyotera district, we argue in this article that the learners' poor performance is a result of a myriad of factors and as such cannot be solely blamed

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on teacher incompetence. We further show the creative ways in which teachers and learners overcome such difficulties, such as the elective nature of the language in education policy, poor infrastructure, scarcity of learning materials, high absenteeism of learners and the huge pressure on teachers to meet curriculum guidelines amidst inadequate opportunities for in-service training, among others. We also discuss the implications of these challenges faced by teachers.

Introduction

In 2017 and 2018, there was an outcry from Uganda's political leaders regarding children's literacy achievement levels especially in rural areas of the country. The political leaders blamed teachers for the low literacy achievements and poor performance in the national Primary Leaving Examinations (PLE) among rural children (Gwebayanga, 2018; Kinene, 2016; Mutesi, 2018). We argue in this article that whereas teachers might be partly to blame for pupils' poor performances, it is prudent to consider and interrogate other factors that might make it difficult for rural children in Uganda to achieve the desired literacy levels and to perform well in PLE. The article explores some of the factors that constrain literacy outcomes among rural children in Uganda. In addition, we demonstrate creative ways through which both teachers and learners attempt to mitigate these challenges. At the moment, there are efforts towards improving literacy levels for all children in Uganda through public and private programmes such as the Universal Primary Education, mother tongue education and the Research Triangle International's (RTI's) School Health and Reading Programme. Despite such efforts, the advancement of literacy levels still remains slow in the rural areas.

Situated within arguments on education policy in Uganda generally and on literacy in particular, this study does not aim to exonerate teachers from allegations of poor literacy attainment among primary school pupils. Rather the study aims to highlight the fact that teachers too face challenges which include disparities in language policy implementation, lack of teacher in-service support and guidance,

pressure on teachers to meet curriculum guidelines, rampant learner absenteeism and inadequate and/or poor teaching and learning materials. We contend that it is prudent to holistically consider these and other challenges that teachers face in executing their classroom work and try to find solutions to such challenges. In addition, we explore the creative ways through which teachers and learners negotiate these challenges. An understanding of such challenges and the sacrifices teachers and learners make to overcome them can later inform policy formulation and/or teacher training preparations. In this article, we report findings of the study carried out in four rural schools in Uganda, specifically drawing from classroom observations and teachers' follow-up interviews. The data examined is part of a larger study conducted in 2012 and with a followed up in 2018, which explored the process of transitioning from mother tongue education to English as a language of learning and teaching (LoLT) in rural Uganda.

This study is based on Hornberger and Johnson (2011) and Johnson's (2009) theoretical principles of ethnography of studying language policy issues from macro and micro-points of view. These scholars argue that through ethnographic studies, we can learn about how both teachers and students locally create, interpret, and appropriate language policy and planning issues. In addition, we learn about how top-down language policy and planning is challenged to teachers' and students' creativity. Hornberger and Johnson recommend an ethnographic toolkit involving observations, questionnaire and interviewing for language performance study. Some of the recommendations were adopted for this study, as we will see later in the section on data collection.

Literacy attainment: a general overview

According to Blake and Hanley (1995, p.89), "[t]he attribute of literacy is generally recognised as one of the key educational objectives of compulsory schooling; it refers to the ability to read and write to an appropriate level of fluency." This phenomenon is otherwise known as "functional literacy" (Lawton and Gordon, 1996). According to these scholars, functional literacy has to do

with attaining "the appropriate and effective *level* of skill in reading and writing that any individual needs in order to cope with adult life" (sic), even though there are no universally acceptable descriptions of "appropriate and effective" "levels" of literacy (Lawton and Gordon, 1996, p.108). Given the developing and underdeveloped status of many African countries; partly traceable to their educational systems, many scholars and educationists have focused on functional literacy in the African context in general and Uganda in particular.

In his article, "Why impoverished children do well in Ugandan schools*",* Heyneman (1979) observes that when rural children studied under similar circumstances like those of urban children, they performed well. This observation can still apply today, but the situation of education in Uganda has changed considerably: rural children study under circumstances that are different from those of 1979 or earlier. The circumstances that favoured the impoverished children to do well then were self-esteem and confidence, the examination process was fair as schools were largely supported by the government. However, currently, socio-economic status (alongside other factors, such as school environment) is a prime factor in school performance in Uganda (Banda and Kirunda, 2005).

According to the most recent census report of the Uganda Bureau of Statistics (2014) about 25% of Uganda's population lives in urban areas. This means that 75% of the population lives in rural areas, a revelation that should interest us and give us the impetus to dig into understanding the circumstances under which rural children acquire literacy. There are calls for more studies especially by educationists and sociologists into understanding issues affecting children in rural areas and possible solutions to the same. Moletsane (2012) suggests that it is prudent to research and report on what happens in rural contexts in order to devise solutions that are context specific. A discussion of rural challenges enables us to appreciate the contexts under which rural children learn and as a result be able to judge them fairly compared to the urban children who learn in a more resourceful environment. In addition, this discussion paints a picture of the circumstances under which teachers in rural areas operate.

Moletsane further mentions that research in Africa often focuses on deficiencies of the teachers. This means that other factors are unattended to and this leaves a gap in the discourse on efforts to understand what it is that challenges the attainment of literacy in rural contexts. Moletsane (2012, p.4) contends that "the reason for poor learners' performance are complex and can be found in the home, the community, the school, and the society and its various institutions". He, therefore, calls for research in education to focus on rural communities not only to understand the resources therein but also the challenges that are there. These observations motivate us to explore the challenges that Ugandan rural children face in their learning, with a view to debunking the claim that the abysmal performance of school children in rural communities is solely the fault of the teachers 'who have not done a good job'.

A number of studies on literacy acquisition in Uganda focus on mother tongue education programme. For instance, Nankindu (2015) and Ssentanda (2014a, 2014b) have discussed the challenges faced by learners when they are introduced to reading in English and their mother tongue simultaneously. Other studies dwell on policy and the associated difficulties regarding literacy attainment (Ssentanda, 2013; Ssentanda, Southwood and Huddlestone, 2019; Tembe and Norton, 2008). In the remainder of this section, we will point out some of the issues that have been highlighted about literacy acquisition and learners' performance in Uganda.

Kyeyune (2003) advances the view that the poor use of English language in Ugandan schools is partly responsible for the poor performance of learners from primary schools through to secondary schools. Teachers reported in Kyeyune's study that as they teach, they do not pay attention to the English language; all they care about are the "points" in students' work. Banda and Kirunda's (2005) study, carried out in Iganga district, explored the process of rural and urban literacy acculturation in the early years. They discuss the artefacts available in rural and urban areas for children to engage with in their literacy development endeavours. Their study reveals that rural areas have less print materials in form of wall charts, newspapers, books, etc. than their counterparts in urban areas. Moreover, rural

children have limited and/or no opportunities with their parents to discuss literacy issues because most rural parents have little or no education at all (Ngwaru and Opoku-Amankwa, 2010). They observed that such parents do not involve their children in reading and counting as urban parents do. Furthermore, Altinyelken's (2010) study reveals that the preparation teachers had prior to the introduction of the thematic curriculum and the mother tongue policy (which were introduced simultaneously) was not enough for the implementation of both programmes.

In a related study focusing on Uganda and Kenya, Piper and Miksic (2011) investigated the level of compliance of Uganda and Kenya with the language in education policy. They used the EGRA (Early Grade Reading) assessments. They report that one of the reasons for the poor reading skills among learners in Uganda is the possession of textbooks in class. They indicate that "only 3.2 percent of children in Uganda had a textbook in their possession during our classroom observations" (Piper and Miksick, 2011, p.169). They add that "[g]iven the importance of textbooks for students' achievement, it is not surprising that the children did not do particularly well on reading tasks" (Piper and Miksick, 2011:169). In another study, Ssentanda (2014b) discusses the challenges that rural children experience in beginning to learn to read in Primary/Grade I (P1) when English and Luganda (their mother tongue) are taught separately in one class without regard to an approach that can help learners to master similar sounds in the two languages. Again, Ssentanda (2014a) questions the education policy that disregards pre-primary schooling, largely managed by private individuals and taught through the medium of English. Moreover, rural government schools do not have pre-primary schools but private schools do. The absence of a language policy at this level and the lack of a compulsory pre-primary programme for all learners makes the acquisition of literacy skills more difficult.

Uwezo, an organisation in East Africa which reviews educational achievement of primary school learners, has since 2010, consistently revealed that rural children's literacy achievements lie far below those of their counterparts in urban areas. The statistics that Uwezo provides have always been shocking and

have carried headlines in the news, which in turn, prompt education officials in Uganda to blame teachers for "the poor job done". Recent reviews by Uwezo (2016, p.5) indicate that of the "P3−P7 pupils: 3 out of 10 pupils could read an English story and do division". In the rural areas, only 35% of the P3−P7 pupils could do P2 level work (Uwezo, 2016).

Background of study schools

In this section we discuss some background issues to contextualize the insights gathered from the classroom observations and teachers' interviews. In response to the Millennium Development Goals and the Education For All, Uganda introduced the Universal Primary Education (UPE) programme in 1997. Following the introduction of UPE, there was a 145% increase in primary school enrolment, from 3.1 million in 1996 to 7.6 million in 2003 (Inter-Regional Inequality Facility, 2006). The swelling number of learners was, however, not matched with supporting facilities such as teachers, size of classrooms, and textbooks. Suddenly teachers who used to have classes of learner numbers of about 50 to 70 were overwhelmed by hundreds of learners in a single class (Grogan, 2008). Ultimately, the quality of education drastically dwindled to shocking levels (Read & Enyutu, 2004).

The dwindling quality of education precipitated a review of the curriculum in 2004/2005 (Read and Enyutu, 2004). In the review, it was recommended that P1 to P3 classes should have a theme-based curriculum which was considered easier for the young learners than a subject-based curriculum. At the same time, it was considered worthwhile to implement this curriculum in learners' mother languages (Kateeba, 2009). The two programmes were piloted in 2006 and later rolled out countrywide in 2007. Studies that followed the introduction of these two programmes have indicated that the process of teacher preparation and sensitization of the general public about the two intervention programmes was not conducted in a good or well-coordinated manner (Altinyelken, 2010; Altinyelken, Moorcroft and Draai, 2013; Ssentanda, 2013), and that it was hurriedly implemented

without adequate preparation of teachers (Ssentanda, 2013). Accordingly, the mother tongue programme and thematic curriculum have received resistance, particularly from private schools (Ssentanda, 2013), which have since preferred the use of English right from pre-primary through primary. As a result, the quality of education has declined further in many parts of the country, particularly in rural areas. Some parents have resorted to transfer their children from government schools to private schools, leaving mother tongue education to suffer. However, it is not mother tongue education only that compels parents to transfer their children to private schools. At the time of collecting data for this study, the number of learners in government schools discussed here (which offer free education) was relatively smaller than that of learners in private schools (where parents have to pay fees and such other costs like building funds) (see Ssentanda, 2013). These issues reveal that the challenges related to enabling learners to read and write in addition to other literacy-related skills in rural primary schools in Uganda are not solely teacher-related. The change in language education and curriculum review had a good aim of improving the levels of literacy and quality of education but the challenges to attaining this goal seem to be bigger than teachers only.

Methodology

Data for the study were collected from four purposively sampled rural schools: two private and two public. The choice of schools was based on a number of issues: ease of access, known number of learners attending the school (some schools in the area had very few learner numbers and some classes had no learners at all at the time of collecting data), religious affiliation (for the case of government schools) and ownership – whether the school was government owned or private. Each Government school had a religious affiliation; school A was Anglican while school B was Catholic. The private schools did not have a known religious affiliation. Government School B had a larger number of learners than School A, but the number of learners in private schools (schools C and D) was bigger than those in government schools. Private schools had a bigger number of learners because parents transferred learners from government schools to private schools

for various reasons, including the desire to see their children acquire English given that the only language of instruction in private schools is English (see Ssentanda, 2013 for a detailed explanation). School C had the highest number of learners and was cheaper in terms of school fees charged compared to school D. Learners who attended private day schools in this area paid fees in the range of $11.50 – $13 (UGX 50,000) per term and those in boarding paid about $58.80 (UGX 217,000) a term.

Study site

The four study schools are situated in Kyotera[1] district, one of the 121 districts in Uganda, located in the south western part of Uganda. The district is about 186 kilometres from Kampala, the capital of Uganda. The district is largely rural with many people especially the youth leaving the district for Kampala to look for greener pastures. A majority of the residents in Kyotera district are peasant farmers. The study was conducted in Kyotera district for convenience and easy accessibility.

Data collection

The data for this study were collected within the purview of the ethnographic approach (Hornberger and Johnson, 2011). We made use of the ethnographic toolkit (i.e. questionnaire, interviews and classroom observations) which facilitates the understanding of local contexts. The insights gathered from local contexts are very relevant to policy impressions because they reveal the realities on ground in the observed schools. The initial period of data collection lasted three months (September to November 2012) and the second stage took one month (October 2018). A total of 39 copies of a questionnaire were given to P1–P5 teachers. P1 to P3 classes were chosen because these were the classes in which the mother tongue policy was implemented. Data related to P4 and P5 classes are not discussed in this article. Classroom observations were conducted (36 observations excluding the familiarisation instances in 2 months) and 8 teachers, 2 from each school, were engaged in follow up interviews. Classroom observations and interviews

were conducted with teachers by using classroom and interview guides and an audio-recorder respectively. These were enhanced by notetaking. Transcription of classroom observations and interviews was done immediately after data collection and themes were generated for purposes of analysis. Data coding and theming was done during the translation of transcripts. Different colours were used to mark different themes and codes were assigned to indicate which data relate to which class and subject and school. Following Braun and Clarke (2006) and Saldana (2009) guidelines, we generated the initial codes, searched for them, reviewed them, defined them and later wrote a report using the classroom observations and interview transcripts.

For purposes of the current article, we present data largely gleaned from classroom observations and supplemented by follow-up interviews with teachers. We refer to this data to highlight the insights obtained from the classrooms and perceptions of teachers of the factors that constrain literacy outcomes under the mother tongue education programme and show how teachers and learners work around to overcome the challenges. Ethical clearance was obtained from the Stellenbosch Humanities and Social Sciences Committee as well as from the Uganda National Council for Science and Technology (UNCST).

Challenges of literacy acquisition in rural schools

In this section, we discuss the challenges that teachers face in the process of developing literacy skills among learners in government schools. Our focus in this article is on the first three years of primary schooling, P1 to P3 because these are the critical years for literacy attainment (Wren, 2000). We discuss these challenges as observed in the classrooms and teachers' perceptions of the factors constraining literacy outcomes. We further show how teachers and learners creatively overcome these challenges.

Policy challenge: the pre-primary school level

According to a 2017/2017 survey by the Uganda National Housing Survey (UNHS), 56% of children in Uganda aged between 3-5, have never attended pre-

primary school (UNHS 2017). A majority of these children are in rural areas. The pre-primary level (Early Childhood Development, ECD) has been neglected for long (cf. Ejuu, 2012) so much that it is not listed among the education levels in Uganda. The neglect of pre-primary level in rural schools potentially affects literacy outcomes. This situation is made worse by the fact that the curriculum is designed in a way that assumes that every child who joins P1 is already exposed to some knowledge of, for example, sound recognition, writing, and reading. However, this is not the case especially with government schools in rural areas. Teachers in such schools are under pressure to bring learners to speed with the P1 curriculum which expects learners to have had background knowledge as noted above. In the interviews with a P1/P3 teacher in government school A, the teacher emphasised the challenge that pre-primary schooling has on literacy development advancement in government schools. In the extracts below, turns marked 'T' are for teachers, 'Ls', learners and 'RS' for the interviewer. Luganda text is bold while translations are italicised.

Extract 1: P1/P3 teacher explains the difficulties of teaching a P1 learner who did not attend pre-primary

> T: When you get out a P1 curriculum, you find that the first topic for term I is *Our home*. People found at home. So as you teach, you will introduce the topic *Our home* and then begin to speak and write titles of people found at home: mother (**maama**). And then you will say **maama** and the child will respond **maama**. But even as they repeat after me, they do not know letter/sound 'm'; they do not know that when I join 'm' with 'a' I get syllable 'ma'. But the curriculum planners go ahead to tell us that we should teach in that manner.

The teacher's experience above clearly explains the challenge that rural children go through in the process of learning to read and write without a background of pre-primary schooling.

The other challenge has to do with learning how to write and read in government schools in P1 and P2. Classroom observations revealed that in P1 and P2, government school teachers were still struggling with learners to not only teach them how to hold a pencil and book and shaping letters, but also to understand that writing is done from left to right. Certainly, the teachers are doing what they are not supposed to do in P1 and P2. As a result, they have less time devoted to the literacy activities meant for P2. When teachers continuously dedicate time to the activities that children should have done at pre-primary, there is a lot that is not attended to for the current year and so children cumulatively lose out while their counterparts who have attended pre-primary have an edge over them. The study by Uwezo resonates well with the observations made in the current study, namely that "[n]ationally, P3−P7 pupils with pre-primary education were more likely to be able to read a P2 level story" (Uwezo, 2016, p.5). Conversely, it means that those who have not gone through the pre-primary level are more likely not to be able to read a similar story when attending P3 through to P7 classes.

To illustrate the difficulty that teachers face in government schools due to their learners not attending pre-primary, we show that children in P2 are still struggling to shape letters, a challenge not found in private and/or urban schools (see extract 2).

Extract 2: Children in P2 class, government school B struggling with shaping letters

T: **Ate endala? Zeezo. Tulina okugoberera amateeka agakola ki? Twagamba ennyukuta empanvu ekola etya...?**

What else? That is all. We must follow rules that...? What did we say a long letter does?

Ls: **Etuuka ku line**.

It touches the line.

T: **Etuuka ku ki?**

It touches the^…

Ls: **Ku line.**

On the line.

T: **Emalayo line**.

It occupies the entire line.

The children who have not attended pre-primary in government schools continue with the challenges in extract 2 as they progress in their academic journey. Wren (2000, pp.7-8) speaks of this scenario when she states that "if children are still struggling with reading skills in the third grade, odds are, they will be struggling the rest of their lives." She adds that "if children who lack the foundational skills do not develop those skills earlier on, their peers leave them behind…. By fourth grade, helping children to gain these foundational skills is time-consuming and usually very frustrating for the child, and it is also usually unsuccessful" (Wren 2000, p.8). Wren further states that it is erroneous to assume that children who are struggling with reading will later on "catch up"; and that usually such children will never catch up with those whose skills were developed at an early age. No wonder that national evaluations like those of Uwezo and/or Uganda National Examinations Board at the end of primary schooling reflect such challenges occurring in rural contexts. Even as teachers face this policy challenge, the study has demonstrated how teachers enact ways (Hornberger and Johnson, 2011) of helping learners to acquire literacy skills in P1 and P2 by combining class activities meant for pre-primary level and those of P1 in the P1 class.

Absenteeism

There are many reasons that can explain students' absenteeism from the school. Classroom observations revealed that many learners missed class regularly. For example, when teachers in government schools (A and B) completed conducting their lessons, they either asked class monitors to give out books to their fellow classmates or the teacher read out learners' names from books so that each learner

could pick up their book to attempt an exercise and/or take notes. In many cases, learners shouted out to indicate which learner was absent and, on some occasions, gave reasons for the absence of such a learner (turn 2 extract 3), on request of the teacher (turn 1) and/or volunteered an explanation (turn 6). At school B, the following exchange arose between the teacher and learners regarding learners who were absent in P2 at that school.

Extract 3: Learner absenteeism at government school B, P.2

1T: Mugalu Jimmy **yalaga wa**?

Where did Magulu Jimmy go ?

2L1: **Alunda nte**.

He is herding cows.

3T: Eeeh?

Yes? [What did you say?]

4L1: **Alunda nte**.

He is grazing cows.

5T: **Ate** Bisaso?

What about Bisaso?

6L2: **Kisekka agambye nti nno ali mu kibuga**.

Kisekka says that he is in town [usually referring to Kampala or Kyotera – a nearby town].

Furthermore, the interviews with teachers also revealed that the challenge of learners' absenteeism was bigger. Exchanges we had with teachers revealed that there were various reasons that delayed learners in reporting to school or made them to miss school. In the extract below, teacher T3 mentioned that some learners

took over a month to report to school which affected their learning process.

Extract 4: Reasons for learners' absenteeism from school

1T3: **Kibatwaliranga n'omwezi abamu nga tebannajja! Kati gye bali mbayitako**.

It takes them over a month without reporting to school. They are still in the village; as I come to school, I see them going different directions.

Furthermore, as captured in turn 4 below, it was reported that some learners delayed to report to school because their parents were not able to provide learning materials in time. Thus, the children stayed home for as long as it took the parents to get them learning materials. For example, teacher T3 reported that his class (P3) had close to 40 learners. Out of these, only 24 learners (see turn 8) had reported to school on the day of observation.

4T3: **Nti ate nze sinnafuna bitabo ate ng'abazadde bagamba sinnafuna ssente zigula bitabo**.

Some say that they have not yet got books and parents say they have not yet got money to buy books.

5RS: **Olimba**?

Is that true?

6T3: **Mhm**.

It is true.

7RS: **Kubanga olwaleero obadde n'abaana ndowooza oba kkumi? Mbadde mbawandiise wano, ka tulabe**, 24.

Because today you had about 10 learners? Let me check quickly and see; they are 24.

8T3: **Kati ku budde buno nnina ana, bawera ana,**

tebannaggwaayo.

At this moment I have forty, they add up to forty, all of them have not come.

[Teacher sounded unsure of the exact learner number in his class]

9RS: Mhm.

Again, teachers mentioned that the festivities and ceremonies in the villages where learners stayed also kept them away from schools for so long as the preparation for and celebration of the festivities or ceremonies took (see lines 10 through to 13). The learners were running errands for their parents in preparation for the pending ceremonies. Note that the cultural functions do not only affect children in the family conducting the ceremony (see turn 18) but also the children whose families have to participate in preparation for the same (see turn 10).

10T3: **Yee. Kati olwaleero tebazze eriyo eyo ekikujjuko kumpi n'e X[2]. Waliyo okwabya olumbe, kati bamaama baabwe bwe babeera eyo ndowooza n'abaana baabwe bagenda nabo.**

Yes, today some did not come because there is a festival near X. There is a last funeral rites ceremony[3]. So when the mothers attend the ceremonies, perhaps they go with their children.

11RS: **Kikujjuko kyaki?**

What is the ceremony about?

12T3: **Eriyo Mwami gundi balinayo okwabya ennyimbe. Oba omumanyi? Taata wa baNakaayi ye ani?**

Mr…, they have to perform last funeral rite ceremonies. Perhaps you know him? I do not know whether you know him. Who is Nassali's father? [asks fellow teacher].

13T1: **Ye Nakaayi ennaku zino nga takyasoma**?

By the way, How come Nakaayi no longer comes to school these days?

14T3: **Anti balinayo okwabya ennyimbe ewaabwe**.

They have a last funeral rite ceremony at their home.

15T1: **Kaakati kye kimubeeza smart bw'atyo n'ejjo namusanze ng'ali** smart **bw'ati**.

Oh, is that what keeps her elegant these days, I met her yesterday dressed smartly.

16T2: **Wiiki nnamba talabikako**.

She has not appeared for a full week

17T1: **Namusanze jjo ali** smart **ng'agenda ndowooza oba mu katale**? **Kati olumbe w'amalidde ewiiki, bwe kunaaba kukola mbaga ajja kumala mwezi**.

I found her yesterday dressed elegantly; she was possibly going to the market. If she has spent a week attending a last funeral rites function, she would then spend a whole month attending to wedding preparations.

18T3: **Kati na wali ewali emikolo tulinawo abayizi baffe, wiiki bagikubye wali**.

Even at the other place there is a ceremony; we have students who have spent a full week without coming to school.

When learners regularly miss school, they often do not achieve what they would have accomplished within a given period. Accordingly, the literacy levels of such learners come adrift from those that attend classes regularly. Ultimately, when they are assessed, the irregular learners cannot perform at the same level as the regular learners. The challenges pointed out in extract (4) are considerably at lower degrees in urban areas (Ngwaru and Opoku-Amankwa, 2010).

The issue of absenteeism affects learners' literacy outcomes; once a learner misses school consistently, s/he misses out on classroom instruction and activities

required to develop his/her writing and/or reading skills, for example. As such, they trail behind others who regularly attend school. Ultimately, when national literacy evaluations are conducted, for example those by Uwezo, and such learners are assessed on content or activities which they missed to cover while they were away from school, they perform poorly relative to others who are very regular in school.

5.3 Scarcity of learning materials

Classroom observations and teacher interviews revealed that the challenge of learning materials, particularly on the side of learners was immense. The challenge is twofold: on the side of learners in government schools, both classroom interactions and teachers' reports revealed that there were learners who reported to school without either books or pens or both. In the extract below, teachers narrate how some learners report to school without writing materials and sometimes depended on fellow learners sharing theirs. .

Extract 5: Some learners come to school without learning materials, School B P2.

1RS: **Waliwo abatalina bitabo?**

Are there learners without books?

2T: **Yee, tebannabawa. Bajja nga tebalina**.

Yes, [parents] have not yet given them. They come without them.

3RS: **Ate** pencils?

What about pencils?

4T: Pencils, **nazo bajja nga tebalina, naye bamanyi okusharinga**. **Bwe wabaawo amaze ng'awaako munne bwe bityo**.

They also come without pencils, but they learnt how to share. When one finishes they share with others. That is how we operate.

The above scenario means that those with materials attempted an exercise and/or took notes first while those who did not have waited for so long as their colleagues took to finish before they too could do a similar exercise. This arrangement affects both groups of learners. Those with materials may be forced to rush through their activities in order to help others thereby skipping some details that should be helpful to their learning. For those waiting to borrow the materials, there might not be enough time for them to do the activities by the time their friends lend them the materials. In the process, the development of literacy skills, particularly writing is not given the due attention that it deserves and in the long run, learners fail to develop this skill fully because of lack of practice arising from lack of writing materials.

On the side of the teachers, the 2012 data revealed that the teaching and learning materials in both government and private schools were insufficient. In all instances of classroom observations in government schools, there was only one instance where a teacher was seen carrying textbooks in class but these too were insufficient. Learners were required to get into groups but again, the books could not serve all groups. As for charts on classroom walls, private schools had more charts on the walls than government schools. In some government school classrooms teachers used charts displayed on classroom walls to show some of the content in texts books. In sum, the problem of scarcity of reading materials should not be blamed solely on the teachers. The study demonstrated that even as there is a lack of learning materials among learners, teachers at this school have devised means of overcoming this challenge in order to facilitate the attainment of literacy skills. For example developing wall charts, and encouraging learners to share books and/or pencils. .

The challenge of a one-teacher-per-classroom approach and pressure to meet curriculum guidelines

In the excerpt below, teachers share insights regarding the challenge of running a class single-handedly.

Extract 6: Teachers talk about the challenge of one teacher per class, school A

1T1: **Ahaa,** point **endala esaana balowoozeeko, gavumenti ky'esaana okulowoozaako ekirala, ogamba otya omuntu omu okusomesa abantu kikumi mu ssaawa musanvu, ddakiika asatu asatu nga ye oyo omu**?

Yea! Another thing that the government should think about is that how can you ask one person to teach one hundred pupils in seven hours; the same person appearing every thirty minutes?

2T3: **Ahaa, ate n'ova okwo bakwagala gundi eno erondoola abaana, eya** individual **ate n'eyawamu yonna n'osanga…**

Yea! And then after that they need you to work on the continuous assessment of each learner; so you find that…

3RS: **Lessons ziri kkumi oba ziri munaana?**

Are the lessons ten or eight?

4T1: Kkumi.

Ten.

5T3: **Ziri munaana.**

They are eight.

6T1: **Ezammwe kkumi. Ezaffe ze zandibadde kati omunaana**.

Your lessons are eight. It is ours that would have been eight.

7T3: **Ezammwe ziri munaana?**

Are yours eight?

8T1: **Ez'abo kkumi. Hmm, nze nabatya!**

Theirs are ten. Yea, I am really amazed at what the government did.

9T3: **Kati oteekeko n'okukola lesson plan, wamma omulimu gutukooya! Yadde gavumenti yo egamba nti mbunno biki, naye ebintu bingi bye batuteekako ebitakyakoleka.**

And that includes preparing lesson plans; indeed, this kind of work is so tiresome! The truth is that we have a big load onto us and we can no longer manage to handle.

10T1: **Kubanga class eyagala abasomesa babiri babiri.**

Because every class requires two teachers.

The curriculum guidelines (NCDC, 2011) stipulate that P1 to P3 classes should be run by one teacher each and the teacher is expected to handle all the thematic areas in his/her class. However, teachers' narratives indicated that this approach is unfair to them, and in turn, it greatly compromises their work (see extract above). The one-teacher-one-class approach directly affects literacy acquisition in the schools where it is done. For example, teachers narrated that in instances where a teacher was ill or had a challenge that kept them away from school, the class to which that teacher was allocated would go without a teacher for as long as that teacher is away. Consequently, learners lose out on the contact hours with their teacher and such lost time may never be recovered. Other scholars discourage this practice in favour of team teaching and specialisation in subjects and/or areas taught in anyone class (Benson, 2004; Kembo, 2000). They instead support specialisation in subjects, which in their view enhances effectiveness. As teachers are not encouraged to specialise, some learning areas are bound to suffer as one teacher cannot be good and eloquent in all subject areas. Again, non-specialisation constrains the literacy outcomes in government schools. Although private schools also face a challenge of literacy development, the challenge of allocating one-teacher per class was not observed

Teachers also reported that when a teacher is transferred or when death occurs, a new posting may not come immediately. For example, in 2018, while we

were collecting data not related to the current study, school A was found to have no P1 teacher throughout 2018. The P1 teacher this school previously had passed on and teachers were not sure of when another replacement would be posted at that school. So, this school was run by only 6 teachers all through the year. In some cases, teachers were forced to combine some classes into one. Needless to say that this complicates the learning process because the classes are not planned to be run on a multi-grade approach. In the end, the literacy outcomes are constrained.

Infrastructure/school buildings

Figure 1: Classrooms at school A and C respectively

For learning to take place, learners need a good environment in the form of proper structures: buildings and furniture. Of all the four schools studied, school C (Figure 1 A) had non-permanent structures but it had the largest numbers of learner. As mentioned, private schools in the study area had larger numbers of learners than government schools (see Ssentanda, 2013).

As seen in Figure 1, the environment in school C was not learner friendly. First, whenever it rained, the classrooms (temporary structures) would be flooded with water, making it impossible for learning activities to take place. This means

that during the rainy season, learning at this school was greatly affected. Second, the classrooms did not have proper walls separating one classroom from another, and as such classroom activities (with their attendant sounds and noises) in the neighbouring classes would interfer with and disrupted the activities in the other class(es). This is not helpful to learning, given the fact that primary school children have limited concentration and any slight interruption takes away their attentiveness. Third, there were not enough desks for all learners in various classrooms. P1 in school C had benches on which learners sat during the instruction period and when time came for writing, the learners knelt on the floor, thereby converting benches into tables for writing . With such a poor sitting posture, it becomes challenging for learners to practise proper writing and/or to write neatly. Government schools (e.g. Figure 1 A above) did not have the problem of infrastructure and the learning process was therefore not affected by the weather changes.

Conclusion and recommendations

The aim of this article was to show that the challenge of literacy outcomes in Uganda cannot and should not to be entirely blamed on perceived teachers' incompetence. However, the study does not necessarily absolve teachers from the unfortunate development. The study was carried out with recourse to the ethnographic tenets of data elicitation. In tandem with the aim and objectives of the study, we have highlighted the challenges of literacy acquisition in Ugandan rural schools to include elective nature of the language in education policy, poor infrastructure, scarcity of learning materials, high absenteeism of pupils and the huge pressure on teachers to meet curriculum guidelines and coverage amidst inadequate opportunities for in-service training, among others. Even if teachers were competent, such intervening factors would make the acquisition of the desired literacy skills challenging. The answer to the attainment of literacy skills and later better grades among rural children does not lie in political leaders blaming teachers; rather, it lies in concerted efforts where the different stakeholders play their roles diligently. In view of this, it is recommended that Ugandan government should speed up the provision of pre-primary schools (ECD) and attach same

to government schools as suggested in the National Development Plan (Uganda National Bureau of Statistics, 2017). Reinforcing the position of Ssentanda (2014a), it is further suggested that pre-primary level should be made compulsory so that all children in Uganda have an opportunity to experience and benefit from what this level of education offers. There is also the need for the government to come out strongly and sensitise parents on what their role(s) are/is regarding the UPE programme as many believe that it is the government's sole responsibility to provide school fees and learning materials for the children. Parents should equally be sensitised on the importance of regular attendance at school in order to realise that children lose out when they do not report for school regularly. Finally, there is need to conduct more ethnographic studies in schools (classroom-based) in order to get a deeper understanding of the environments within which teachers do their work and the circumstances within which children acquire literacy, particularly in rural contexts where literacy levels are low and slow to gain.

Notes

1. In 2012, the study area fell under Rakai district until it was parcelled out into two districts, namely Rakai and Kyotera.
2. We have purposely kept the village name anonymous for fear of readers gaining clues to the location of the school being discussed.
3. It is a ceremony held to celebrate the life of the departed and to install an heir for them. It is a big ceremony at which relatives and friends, not restricted in number, gather for the above purposes. The ceremony involves a lot of work, particularly with regard to cooking (catering services). Family members usually gather an evening prior to the d-day.

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